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Questions and Answers about Tuberculosis (TB)

What is TB?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by bacteria that are spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other areas of the body, such as the brain, the kidneys, or the spine. Tuberculosis disease is both preventable and treatable, but can be fatal in those who do not receive treatment.

How is TB spread?

TB germs enter the air when a person with TB disease of the lung or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. The germs are expelled into the air, and if a nearby person breathes them in, that person can become infected with TB. TB is killed relatively quickly by sunlight, so transmission usually occurs indoors. The TB germ can live in the air for only a short time, about 4 hours, and then dies.

People with active TB disease are most likely to spread it to people they spend time with every day like family members, friends, and classmates. TB is not usually spread to persons who spend a small amount of time with a person who has active TB disease. TB cannot be spread by sharing paper, pens, books, food, someone's clothes, a handshake or the toilet.

What happens when someone is infected with TB?

In the vast majority of people who become infected with TB, the body is able to contain the bacteria to keep them from spreading and causing serious disease. This is called **Latent tuberculosis Infection**, which means the germ is living in the body, but not causing disease or symptoms. People with latent TB are not ill, and only know that they have this condition when a skin test or other test shows that the bacteria are in their body. They are not able to spread tuberculosis disease to other individuals. Those with latent tuberculosis have risk of developing severe tuberculosis disease in the future, also called **Active Tuberculosis Infection**, and for this reason they are highly recommended to take medication to treat the infection and prevent them from developing active tuberculosis. Treatment for latent tuberculosis is usually with a single antibiotic taken for a period of 9 months.

What are the symptoms of Active Tuberculosis?

Active tuberculosis occurs when TB bacteria are in the body, and the body's immune system is not able to stop them from spreading. The bacteria grow in the body, and cause active disease. General symptoms of active TB disease include feeling weak or sick, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. Symptoms of TB of the lungs may include coughing, chest pain and/ or coughing up blood. Patients with active TB usually need to be treated with at least four antibiotic medications for a prolonged period of time, and those with active TB of the lungs are able to spread the disease to others until they have been on medications for several weeks. Untreated active TB can lead to severe illness and death.

How do I get tested for TB?

Initial testing consists of a TB skin test. A small needle is used to place testing material, called purified protein derivative (PPD) under the skin. A healthcare worker inspects the test site two or three days later, to see if there is reaction to the test. A positive test usually means that a person has been infected with TB. It does not mean that the person has active TB disease. A chest X-Ray is needed to see if the TB has spread in the lungs. If the chest X-ray is normal, the person has latent TB infection, and appropriate treatment will be recommended.

Once exposed to TB, how long does it take for the skin test to become positive?

It can take a period of two weeks for a skin test to become positive after exposure to TB. When an investigation of potential TB exposure is done, the normal procedure is to undertake **"Two-Step Testing."** In this practice an initial

skin test is done close to the time exposure may have occurred. A follow up test is then performed on those with negative test results 8 to 10 weeks later. A negative result on the second test will indicate there has been no infection with TB.

How do I know if my child was exposed?

The Department of Health (DOH) is conducting a thorough investigation to identify all students and faculty who have had contact with the infected individual. These students and faculty will receive guidance from the DOH for testing and follow up as needed.

Why aren't all the students and faculty being tested?

At this time, only the students and faculty whom the DOH has identified as having contact with the individual need to be tested.

Is the school going to be disinfected to prevent a further case of TB?

As stated previously, the bacteria live only a short time in the environment. No additional cleaning measures in the school are necessary to prevent infection at this time.

What if my child has not been identified as a contact, but I still want the testing done?

At this time, the DOH has determined that your child does not need to be tested for TB. If you still have concerns, you may contact your family physician to discuss testing.